

St-Peter's Roman Catholic Mission in Montana Territory



From left to right, the nuns are: Mother Mary Amadeus Dunne; Sister St-Ignatius; and Sister St-Thomas.
A group of Ursuline nuns pose with Native American girls at St-Peter's Mission, near Cascade, Montana, in the United States in December 1897. The Ursuline nuns ran a day-school and boarding-school for boys and girls at St-Peter's Mission.

The Blackfoot asked that a mission be established in their country so that the rites of the church might be given them, and in 1858 **Major Vaughn**, agent of the Blackfoot, forwarded a petition asking that a 'blackrobe' be sent them. **Father A. Hoecken** and **Brother Magri** were assigned in April 1859, and located a mission on the Teton river near where *Choteau* now is located, immediately north of Priest's Butte. On Tuesday, 13 March 1860, Catholic priests of the **Society of Jesus** (better known as the **Jesuits**) moved the mission to the foot of Sullivan Hill on Sun River, about 8 miles (13 km) upriver from **Fort Shaw**, Montana. They erected a couple of cabins - and **St-Peter's Mission**¹ became the first mission established by the Jesuits east of the Rockies.

In the spring of 1862, Father Imoda, Father Gieorda, Brother Francis DeKock and Lucian D'Agnostina again moved the mission six miles above the mouth of Sun river, *above where is now Great Falls* - but this location proved difficult for agriculture. In 1864, log cabins were erected by Father Anthony Ravalli and Father F. X. Kuppens. In the winter of 1865-66, the present site of St-Peter's Mission was selected; Father Imoda established camp at the new place and with the assistance of another priest - and a number of Indians prepared logs, stone and all the necessary materials.

According to a record left by Father Kuppens, they had plans that included all the different departments for chapel and community life; for school and industrial training. Lumber was hauled from Helena. During the winter, the work was never interrupted and the houses were virtually ready in the spring. On Friday, 27 April 1866, they abandoned the mission on the Missouri - and, on the same day, they opened the new St-Peter's Mission. Unfortunately, the very next day they closed that mission, *too* - temporarily - because of a **war of extermination** being carried out by the Blackfoot against the Whites.

From 1866-to-1874 the mission and all its belongings were in care of a faithful steward named **Thomas Moran**, *a highly-respected and well known Irishman in Great Falls*. Services were held in the little church

right along, however, by traveling priests, and the bell, then not cracked, was rung regularly to call the faithful to worship.

In April 1866 the mission moved again, this time to a position 2 miles (3.2 km) south - to **Bird Tail Rock** (which is 15 miles (24 km) south of the town of Simms, Montana). With the relocation of the border of the **Blackfoot Indian Reservation** the federal government forced the tribe to give up more-and-more land, almost immediately, *though*, due to hostility from the nearby Peigan Blackfoot tribe, the Jesuits decided to move their mission - but wanting to remain close to the tribe they were proselytizing, the mission was reopened in 1874 - and prospered for many years. There were the usual agricultural and stock-raising activities to supplement the industrial school for Indian boys.

However, the mission had one great handicap: The rapid settling of the region by the Whites had caused the government to restrict the territory of the Blackfoot and, as a consequence, the Indians were now placed on a reservation some 100 miles to the north of the mission. So, finally, in 1881 a new mission nearer the Indians had to be established.

At first this new dependency was on the outskirts of the reservation at **Birch Creek**, *at a point 10.5 miles (16.9 km) west-northwest of Cascade*. The Jesuits constructed a **small chapel**, a **chapel expansion**, and **log cabin residences**. The first buildings at St-Peter's Mission were spartan. With assistance from some of the **Métis** and, occasionally, **soldiers** from nearby **Fort Shaw**, the priests built a one-story rectangular chapel out of logs, which were stripped of bark and roughly squared off by hand. For a time the chapel doubled as **sleeping quarters** for the priests. A second square-log building attached to the chapel was quickly constructed to serve as sleeping quarters and **kitchen**. This structure doubled the mission's size. By the end of 1881, the priests had constructed several **small log cabins** to serve as individual **priestly residences**. They attached these to the west end of the expanded chapel, creating an **L-shaped structure**.



A view of St-Peter's Mission on Birch Creek (now Mission Creek) west of Cascade, Montana.

St-Peter's Mission continued to expand in 1882. At some point between 1874-and-1881, the Jesuits built a wood frame structure to house a school for boys. The log cabins were *subsequently* separated from the chapel and moved south of it, and a **one-story wooden clapboard dormitory** for priests and male students was built in their place. A **three-story clapboard bell tower** was built where the chapel and dormitory met.

In the 1880s, a shortage of Roman Catholic **priests** in Montana led the priests of St-Peter's Mission to travel widely throughout the area in the summer months to perform **weddings**, **baptisms**, and other **ceremonies**.

In 1883, **Father Joseph Damiani** offered Métis leader **Louis Riel** a teaching position at St-Peter's Mission. Riel, his wife **Marguerite Monet dite Belhumeur**, and his son **Jean-Louis** were living with nomadic Métis. But with Marguerite pregnant with their second child - **Marie-Angèlique**, Riel decided to settle in one place to provide his children with more stability.

In 1883, weeks after obtaining **U.S. Citizenship**, Riel accepted a teaching position at the Catholic mission of St-Peter's on Montana's Sun River. In December 1883, he began teaching English, French, mathematics, and training in a variety of practical manual skills (wood carving, metal working, leather making, and so on) to 22-to-25 Métis boys. The student body at St-Peter's Mission changed over time, however. **A'aninin** (known to Whites by the mistranslated name "**Gros Ventres**") boarding students soon outnumbered the Métis day-students, and the Jesuits began to successfully encourage the **Peigan Blackfoot** to send their children to the school as boarding students., as well.

Riel enjoyed teaching, but the job paid poorly and the hours were too long to allow him time to pursue his true interests in religion, poetry, and politics. From deep depression in the winter, Riel rebounded to a mood of optimism - around Easter Riel received an exciting revelation:

"The Lord said to me: I have tested you and you have remained faithful. You must march ahead. You asked Me for it, and it is My will: your prosperity henceforth will be as unshakable as Gibraltar."

Other encouraging revelations emerged after Riel received a letter from the **South Branch Métis** in May, informing him of their planned visit and pleading for his services. So it is no surprise that a **delegation of South Branch Métis** arrived at St-Peter's - on Wednesday, 4 June 1884 - imploring Riel to return with them to assist in advocating the Métis effort to secure treaty enforcement from the Canadian government. The dream he had cherished for so long was coming true: his people needed him. It was with exaltation that he readily accepted the invitation to come to the Saskatchewan District - and he and his family left St-Peter's on Tuesday, 10 June 1884, never to return. After an absence of fifteen years, he was returning to Canada.

These years had strongly marked him, for, exiled from his native land and pursued by bounty hunters, he had suffered a nervous breakdown. Now he saw the opportunity to claim his rights and those of his brethren from the Canadian government.

Meanwhile, the new (and founding) Bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Helena, **Jean-Baptiste Brondel**, invited the **Ursuline religious order** of women to join the Jesuits at St-Peter's Mission in

January 1884. A sister in the Toledo chapter, **Mother Mary Amadeus** (Sarah Therese Dunne), led five Ursulines to St-Peter's in October. By 1885, they had established a boarding school for girls (open to children of settlers and Native Americans). A post office opened at the mission the same year, and farming and cattle ranching began at the site.



St-Peter's Roman Catholic Mission, c. 1884



Jean-Baptiste Brondel
Bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Helena

The Jesuits gave the nuns \$200 in provisions, a farm, some cows, and some wagons to help them survive, and promised to pay them \$200 per year to teach boys if more nuns could be brought to the mission. In 1885, the Jesuits began turning over the educational duties of St-Peter's Mission to the Ursulines, who opened **St-Peter's Industrial School for Girls** that year with 11 Blackfoot students.

In 1885, they built several log cabins and a wood frame structure that contained a chapel and classrooms for girls. This structure also had a two-and-a-half story bell tower.



Mother Amadeus,
photographed in early 1884.

Life for the Ursulines was not easy. Their housing was extremely primitive. In addition to their teaching duties, they also cooked, cleaned, sewed, did laundry, nursed the sick, and tried to generate money for their own activities by engaging in for-profit farming, ranching, poultry raising, egg farming, supplying rock, and timber cutting. In a letter to a colleague, Mother Amadeus expressed frustration with having to spend so much time taking care of the priests and with the Jesuit priests' refusal to fund-raise for the Ursulines while back east. Some Ursulines were unable to cope with the harsh life. In 1884, **Sister St-Gertrude** from the Brown County (Ohio) Ursulines joined St-Peter's - but she left in October 1885, "not able to bear the strain of missionary life," as Mother Amadeus said tactfully.

Illness affected the Ursulines, too. In April 1885, Mother Amadeus fell ill with pneumonia. As her condition worsened, word reached the Ursuline convent in Toledo. **Mary Fields**, an African American ex-slave who had formerly been employed by the Dunne family as a servant, worked at the convent. When **Mother Stanislaus**, head of the Toledo chapterhouse (and who exercised authority over the Ursulines at St-Peter's), journeyed to Montana to nurse Mother Amadeus, Fields accompanied her. Amadeus recovered, and Fields decided to stay in Montana. For the next eight years, she helped the sisters with farming, constructing buildings, running the laundry, and driving the freight wagon to nearby Cascade.



"Stagecoach Mary" Fields

Known as "**Stagecoach Mary**," she cursed, smoked cigars, drank liquor, carried a loaded firearm, and fought anyone who gave her the slightest insult. In 1894 Bishop Brondel demanded that Fields leave the mission after she *fought a duel in Helena* with a man who insulted her. Estranged from the church by Brondel's decision, Fields moved to nearby Cascade. Mother Amadeus provided her with funds to open a restaurant. When the restaurant later failed, Mother Amadeus helped Fields win a job as a mail carrier.

The **expansion of St-Peter's** had led to federal approval for a *post office* at the mission in 1885. After arriving in Montana, Mother Amadeus asked Bishop Brondel to give her control over the Ursulines,

but he declined to do so. Amadeus repeatedly asked **Mother Stanislaus** for more sisters to help with the work in Montana. Her requests were denied. She appealed to **Richard Gilmour**, Bishop of Cleveland, Ohio. When Mother Stanislaus complained, Mother Amadeus denied she was making an end-run around the chapterhouse, claiming instead that she was acting under instruction from Bishop Brondel. In February 1886, Bishop Gilmour ordered the Ursulines in Toledo to stop talking about how much they wished to teach in Montana, and ordered the St-Peter's Ursulines separated from the Toledo chapter.

Federal funding for the Jesuit boys' school and private donations proved adequate to allow construction of two new buildings in 1887. The first was a boys' school: This *four-story stone building* featured a mansard roof, dormers, and square cupola above the front entrance: The building contained dormitory space for male students, classrooms, a smithy, a cobbler shop, a carpentry shop, and a dining room. The cornerstone for this building was laid on Sunday, 9 September 1888 - and it was occupied on Friday, 1 January 1892. The Ursulines called the new school **Mount Angela Institute**.

Since their arrival in Montana, the Ursulines had attempted to raise funds for the support of their missionary work at St-Peter's. These efforts bore fruit in 1888 when Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, heiress **Katharine Drexel** ⁱⁱ donated \$5000 to allow the nuns to build a convent and school. The *three-story wood frame priests' residence*, built in a *mixed Queen Anne and Second Empire architectural style*, with a basement and centrally placed square cupola was attached to the boys' school on the south. A kitchen garden was planted west and south of these buildings. Over time, the Jesuits and Ursulines built a bakery, barn, corral, laundry, and workers' housing. (In 1895, Drexel also donated a small herd of cattle to the Ursulines at St-Peter's.)

Construction of the boys' school changed the way boys were educated at St-Peter's. Most *instruction was now carried on indoors*, in great contrast to the Native American way of life at the time (in which most time was spent outdoors). The boys were responsible for maintaining the kitchen garden, herding and feeding the small herd of beef cattle, and feeding and milking the *dairy cattle*, so some time each day was spent in the barns, corrals, or garden. Small fields, watered by *irrigation ditches*, were also maintained by the boys. The curriculum did not change throughout the year. Boys were expected to *work in the fields* even in winter, and the amount of time spent indoors did not vary (even during summer, when the growing season demanded that most of the day be spent outdoors).

The *educational structure* at St-Peter's changed in 1889, and this proved controversial. Most Jesuit missions in Montana were on Indian land, and it was common for **White settlers** in the area to pay tuition and have their children educated alongside Native Americans at Jesuit schools. The Jesuits believed this *integrated educational system* also prepared Native Americans for participation in White society. But as the borders of the Peigan Blackfoot territory shrank over time, St-Peter's Mission found itself standing on non-Indian ground. At the request of Bishop Brondel, Father Damiani made the highly controversial decision in 1889 for *segregation of the Native American children*. Nonetheless, both Whites and Native Americans credited the school with providing a clean, safe, warm place to live; three meals a day; and an excellent education. Peigan Blackfoot leaders later credited the mission with giving their tribe well-educated leadership other tribes lacked.

The *four-story convent and girls' school* featured a mansard roof, dormers, small towers capped with cupolas, and a centrally-located four-story square domed tower over the entrance.

Mother Amadeus was still agitating for additional independence. Although the **Ursulines at St-Peter's** won independence from the Toledo chapterhouse in 1886, the Ursulines were still subject to the authority of the priests and local bishop. Little support came from either source. Although the Ursuline mission in Montana had rapidly expanded, there were still too few nuns to do the work. In 1893, *six Ursulines from Canada* joined the St-Peter's Mission on a temporary basis. Mother Amadeus tried to assert jurisdiction over them, claiming them as permanent residents. Angry, the six returned to Canada (even though Mother Amadeus refused to pay for their travel home).

With the expansion of these facilities, the *girls' education* changed, as well. In addition to religious instruction, the girls learned “modern” *European ways* to cook, sew, and wash laundry. One of the old residential log cabins was turned into a bakery, and some girls learned how to bake with wheat flour and yeast. Unlike the boys, the girls spent all their time indoors.

The Ursulines - who believed in music and art training *as well as* education in reading, math, and science - also built a *two-story wooden music building* (the “opera house”) in 1896. This “L”-shaped structure was 10 bays wide on its long edge, and the wing was three bays wide. The building contained an auditorium and stage for musical performances, and here the girls were taught dancing, embroidery, painting, wood carving, and how to play various musical instruments. The sisters also added a barn, corral, laundry, and workers' housing.



The Ursuline convent and girls' school (finished in 1896).

By 1895, the curriculum taught by the Jesuits and Ursulines was being questioned. Most Piegan Blackfoot and A'aninin hated working indoors, no matter how well-constructed or decorated the schools and dormitories. Federal officials in charge of *Indian education* at the local level were aware of the Native Americans' hearty dislike of the schools, and by the mid-1890s most federal officials believed the indoor curriculum was inappropriate. (*Indeed, by 1901, Commissioner of Indian Affairs William A. Jones announced the curriculum had failed.*)

In 1896, the *federal government* began phasing out its financial support for *parochial education for Native Americans*. St-Peter's Mission was one of the first schools to lose its federal funding, even though it had more than 100 girls in classes and (just a short time earlier) 102 boys. With the loss of funding, the Jesuits and Ursulines concentrated their attention on *Holy Family Mission*. This mission, founded in the spring of 1886 by **Father Damiani** but not formally dedicated until Saturday, 25 October 1890, was located on the *Blackfoot reservation* about 100 miles (160 km) north of St-Peter's. (For years, Holy Family had been dependent on St-Peter's.)

The *Ursulines* took over the *boys' educational program* from the Jesuits. The refocusing of Jesuit energy on Holy Family Mission did not mean that the Jesuits abandoned St-Peter's Mission. It still acted as a base of operations and a residence until May 1898, when Father Damiani (Superior of St-Peter's since 1892) and the remaining three *Jesuit priests abandoned the mission*. The diocesan clergy remained to care for the church and conduct Mass, while the Ursulines remained to oversee the educational function.

In 1898, convinced that mission work in Montana was ending, **Mother Amadeus** petitioned Bishop Brondel for permission to travel to *Alaska* to found new Ursuline convents, but he denied her request.

A major development in the international Ursuline organization in 1900 gave the St-Peter's nuns the independence of action they sought. For some years, a movement had existed to unify the hundreds of independent Ursuline chapterhouses into a single organization. A union would also give the Ursulines most of the independence they sought. **Pope Leo XIII** asked for Ursuline delegates to meet in **Rome** to consider creating an **Ursuline Union**. Mother Amadeus traveled to Rome to attend the meeting, in part because she advocated a union and in part because she believed she could win approval from the new organization for an expansion into *Alaska*. Mother Amadeus cast her

eight convents' votes for the union, which was formed. She won approval to go to Alaska from the Union's new Superior General, **Mother St-Julien Aubrey**. Additionally, the Ursuline Union divided the United States into two provinces and appointed Mother Amadeus provincial superior over the North Province.

In October 1902, Mother Amadeus traveled *via train to Miles City, Montana*. Her east-bound train crashed head-on into a west-bound train. Her hip was broken, and Mother Amadeus spent nine weeks in a hospital in *Helena*. The primitive system of weights attached to her ankles (used as traction to keep the hip bones in place) did not work properly, and she walked with a *severe limp* and used a *cane* for the rest of her life.



Saint Katharine Drexel, S.B.S.



Bishop Mathias Lenihan

Bishop Brondel died suddenly in 1903. His replacement, Bishop **Mathias Lenihan**, led the **Roman Catholic Diocese of Great Falls** (founded in 1883), which was formed in 1904. Lenihan was intent on reining in what he saw as unruly nuns. In 1905, Mother Amadeus asked Bishop Lenihan for permission to take some nuns to Alaska to found a convent there. Lenihan refused to allow it. Mother Amadeus then found three Montana Ursulines not yet subject to Lenihan's authority, and escorted them to Seattle to see them off. During her long absence, Bishop Lenihan punished nuns at St-Peter's who supported Mother Amadeus, and encouraged those unhappy with her leadership to accuse her before Ursuline Union of fabricating majority support for the union's formation.

More positively, *however*, **Mother St-Julien Aubrey**, the Superior General of the Ursuline Union, visited St-Peter's Mission in June 1906.



Remains of the boys' school and dormitory are surveyed after the structure burned to the ground.

In January 1908, the stone boys' school, the wooden priests' residence, the one-story chapel addition, the school for Native American girls (formerly the one-story nuns residence), and several outbuildings at **St-Peter's Mission burned to the ground**.

The Ursulines decided to continue the mission at St-Peter's, but move the center of their activity to Great Falls. The **Great Falls Townsite Company** offered them any two city blocks: They chose an

area on a slight hill with a good view which was relatively distant from the busy downtown commercial district.

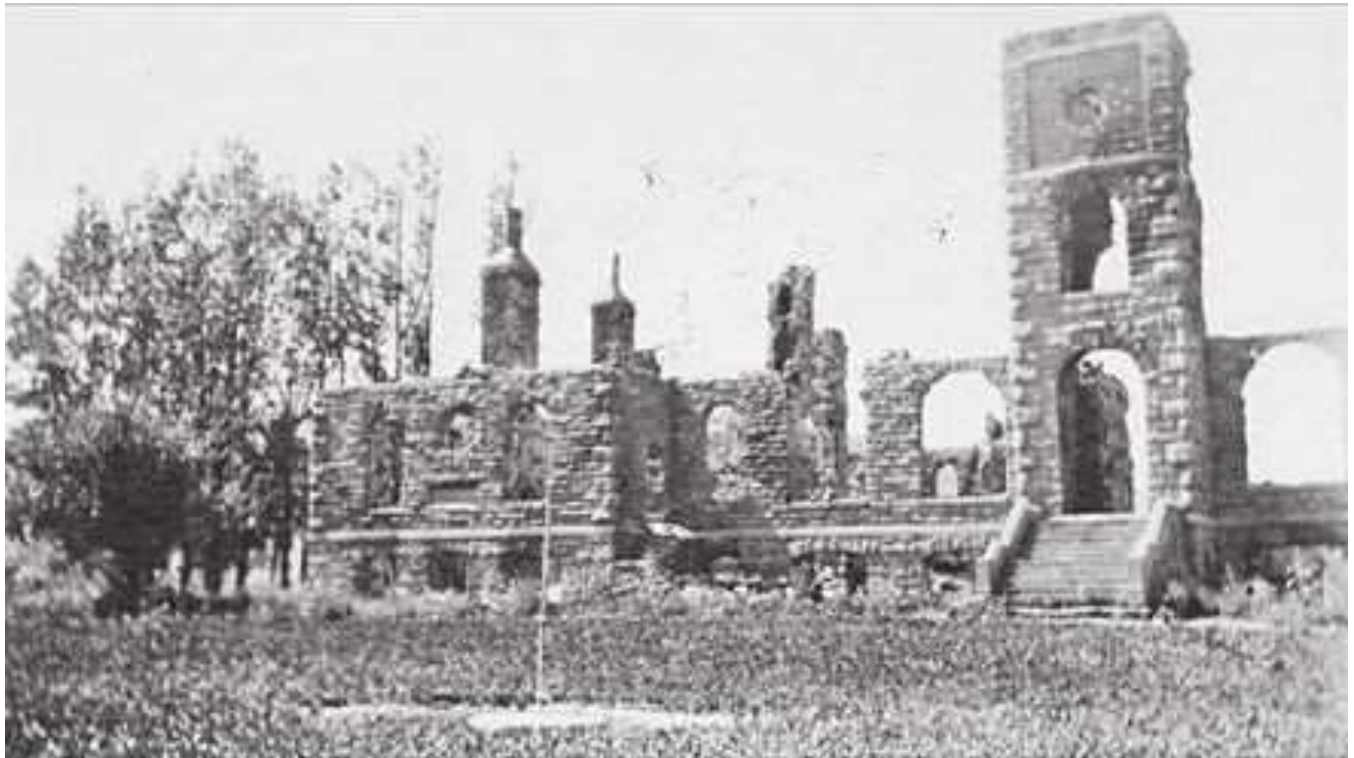
Mother Amadeus left St-Peter's Mission in 1910, moving to Alaska, where she hoped to found a convent of Ursulines. She died there on Monday, 10 November 1919. The Ursulines buried her at St-Ignatius Mission.

St-Peter's Mission slowly fell into decay over the next eight years. After the **Ursuline Academy** in Great Falls opened in 1912, the White girls' school at St-Peter's closed. At 2:30 a.m. on Friday, 15 November 1918, the *stone convent/school burned to the ground*. St-Peter's Mission was abandoned, and all Native American girls were transferred to other mission schools. The St-Peter's post office closed in 1938

As of 2010, most of what remained of St-Peter's Mission was the foundations of prior buildings - many of these crumbling or in serious disrepair. On the edge of a copse of trees are the remains of the boys' school and dormitory. A portion of some stone walls containing windows and doorways remains standing. A small, decrepit log cabin abuts these ruins.

The cemetery is behind and to the right of the chapel, uphill from the ruins of the mission. It was surrounded by a buck fence in 2011 to keep cattle away. Some of the graves in the cemetery are quite tall and others are enclosed by a small, ornate iron fence, but many lie flush in the ground or hidden among the high grass.

Visitors are advised to wear long pants and hiking boots in the area, due to the presence of *prairie rattlesnakes*.



The stone Ursuline convent/girls' school building at St. Peter's Mission after the fire of 1918 that caused the mission's abandonment

ⁱ It was in this church that **William "Henry" Plummer** *youngest child of Ed and Rial Plummer - a prominent pioneer family*, who was not only the first Montana sheriff... but the notorious chief of an outlaw road agent gang known as the "Innocents." In 1864, Plummer was hung and slowly strangled to death at Virginia City by the **Vigilante Committee of Alder Gulch** - was married to **Electa Bryan** *daughter of James Bryan and Mary Johnson*, the first young school teacher who ever taught in the Sun River section, on Saturday, 20 June 1863.

ⁱⁱ **Saint Katharine Drexel, S.B.S.**, (26 November 1858 – 3 March 1955) *second child of investment banker Francis Anthony Drexel and Hannah Langstroth* was an American heiress, philanthropist, religious sister, educator, and foundress. Hannah died five weeks after her baby's birth. For two years Katharine and her sister, Elizabeth, were cared for by their aunt and uncle, **Ellen and Anthony Drexel**. When Francis married **Emma Bouvier** in 1860 he brought his two daughters home. A third daughter, **Louisa**, was born in 1863. Louisa would marry **General Edward Morrell**. The Morrells actively promoted and advanced the welfare of **African Americans** throughout the country. The Morrells used their wealth to build magnificent institutions that served and aided the education and upward mobility of African Americans. Gen. Morrell took charge of the Indian work, while Katharine Drexel was in her novitiate.

In January 1887, the sisters were received in a private audience by **Pope Leo XIII**. They asked him for missionaries to staff some **Indian missions** that they had been financing. To their surprise, the Pope suggested that Katharine become a missionary herself. Although she had already received marriage proposals, after consulting her *spiritual director*, Drexel decided to give herself to God, along with her inheritance, through service to American Indians and Afro-Americans. Her uncle, Anthony Drexel, tried to dissuade her from entering religious life, but she entered the **Sisters of Mercy Convent** in Pittsburgh in May 1889 to begin her six-month postulancy. Her decision rocked Philadelphia social circles. The **Philadelphia Public Ledger** carried a banner headline: "Miss Drexel Enters a Catholic Convent—Gives Up Seven Million."